# SPORT

## Inter open gap at the top after Napoli slip

MILAN: Inter Milan were far from their best but a late 1-0 win over relegation-battling Lecce at the San Siro on Wednesday was enough to move them six points clear at the top of Serie A on Wednesday.

The home side were boosted by defending champions Napoli's 0-0 draw with Parma earlier on Wednesday, but for a long time it looked like Inter would fail to take advantage.

Inter laboured against a stubborn Lecce side before substitute Francesco Pio Esposito scored from a rebound with 12 minutes remaining, pouncing after Lautaro Martinez's powerful shot was kept out by Wladimiro Falcone, for what could end up being a major turning point in this season's title race.

"A great team victory, even the players who don't play as much are always ready to help the team," Inter midfielder Carlos Augusto told DAZN. "The first half was complicated, but that was our own fault as we were too slow with the ball. We weren't quite ourselves but you can't score five goals in every game."

Inter, who drew an entertaining clash with Napoli at the weekend, have won seven of their last eight leagues matches and are six ahead of both the reigning champions and second-placed AC Milan, who have a game in hand.

Inter travel to Udinese at the weekend before welcoming Premier League leaders Arsenal to the San Siro for a huge Champions League fixture.

Christian Chivu's team lost their previous two Champions League matches and are at risk of dropping out of the top eight places which give direct qualification to the last 16.

Lecce meanwhile stay one place and three points above Serie A's relegation zone after collecting just one point from their last five matches.

Napoli created little against Parma beyond a Scott McTominay goal which was disallowed for Pasquale Mazzocchi being offside earlier in the move.

A scrappy match at the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona ended with injury-hit Napoli drawing a third straight match and being further off the title pace.

"We were a bit unlucky... we tried to create chances but Parma defended well," said Cristian Stellini in place of suspended Antonio Conte. "Some of our players have been out for a long time and we don't know when they'll be back."

On Saturday Napoli host another also-ran in Sassuolo before travelling to FC Copenhagen for a match will be key to their prospects of reaching the Champions League playoffs.—Agencies

MILAN: Inter Milan's Francesco Pio Esposito (L) scores past Lecce goalkeeper Wladimiro Falcone during their Serie A match at San Siro.—Reuters

## Blame me, says Arbeloa, as Real exit Copa del Rey

ALBACETE: New coach Alvaro Arbeloa said he was not afraid of failure as he took the blame for Real Madrid's stunning 3-2 defeat to second-division Albacete in the Copa del Rey round of 16 on Wednesday.

Substitute Jefte Betancor scored twice as Arbeloa endured a nightmare start to his managerial career at Real after taking charge of the Spanish giants following Xabi Alonso's departure on Monday.

The shock result capped a dismal week for the club, who also lost 3-2 to Barcelona in Sunday's Spanish Super Cup final.

The 42-year-old Arbeloa inherits a side four points adrift of their arch-rivals Barcelona in La Liga and now out of the Copa del Rey.

Speaking after the humbling result at a misty Carlos Belmonte stadium, the former Real defender took full responsibility for the defeat but insisted that brighter days lay ahead.

"At this club, a draw is always bad, a tragedy. It's painful, and I'm sure all our fans are hurting," Arbeloa told reporters. "I am responsible and to blame. As for the line-up and the substitutions, I can only thank the players. Now we have to recover for Saturday."

Arbeloa's decision to rest several first-team stars came under scrutiny as Real struggled against an organised and determined Albacete side. Despite the result, Arbeloa doubled down on his choices.

"I don't regret it. I was convinced that the squad I brought was the right one," he asserted. "The players we had formed a great team. I would make the same decision a thousand times over. It's difficult for players to adapt to everything I've asked of them in just one day. We also have many players who need to recover physically."

Real's second consecutive loss in less than a week was a blow for Arbeloa, but the manager remained steadfast in his belief that failure is a stepping stone to success.

"I'm not afraid of failure," he said. "I understand anyone who wants to describe this defeat as a failure. Failure is part of the road to success. It will make me better, and it will make us all better. I've endured defeats harder than this one. We'll prepare for the next match with maximum dedication."

He added that Real had a lot of room for improvement physically. "With a new manager, players will need time to adjust to different ideas," he said. "What happens on the pitch is ultimately my responsibility. We need clearer ideas in how we approach matches, particularly against teams that defend deep."

Without French superstar Kylian Mbappe and various other key players, Arbeloa's side struggled against a side currently 17th in Spain's second division.

The hosts took the lead in the 42nd minute after a spell of pressure. A dangerous corner from Jose Lazo found Javier Villar at the near post, with the defender rising highest to head past Real's stand-in goalkeeper Andriy Lunin, sending the crowd into raptures.

Arbeloa's side levelled before the break through, also capitalising on a corner, with Franco Mastantuono turning home from close range.

Albacete regained the lead in the 82nd minute after Real's defence failed to clear their lines from a corner, allowing an unmarked Betancor to find the net with a venomous strike at the far post.

Gonzalo Garcia's pulled Real level in stoppage time with a well-placed header but there was a sting in the tale as Betancor produced a sensational lofted finish past Lunin to snatch a famous late victory for Albacete, their first ever against Real.

"We've hit rock bottom; we've been knocked out by a second division team," Real captain Dani Carvajal told reporters. "You have to face up to it when you lose, and that's what we have to do now. We, the players, are the ones ultimately responsible. There's little else I can say.

"We ask for forgiveness for the fans. We were not up to the level of this club, me first of all, and we will give our lives in the next games and months [to turn it around]."

Elsewhere Real Betis beat Elche 2-1 and Alaves defeated Rayo Vallecano 2-0 to reach the quarter-finals.—Agencies

## Top seeds dominate at national snooker

By Our Sports Reporter

KARACHI: Veteran cueist Mohammad Asif smashed the tournament's highest break as the top seeds delivered commanding performances on the third day of the National Snooker Championship here at the NBP Sports Complex on Thursday.

Asif, a three-time world champion, eclipsed the previous benchmark of 133 with a superb 134 clearance during his 4-0 rout of Aftab Baig. The NBP player, who also crafted a 112 break, affirmed his status as a prime title contender.

The day belonged to the tournament's elite, with defending champion Shahid Aftab maintaining his flawless run. The Punjab potter dispatched Mudassar Yaqoob 4-0, sealing his victory with a 108 break.

Former national champion Asjad Iqbal was equally ruthless, firing two century breaks of 127 and 103 in a 4-0 win against Barjeesh Khan.

Their dominance underscored a trend among the favourites. Last year's runner-up Mohammad Sajjad secured a 4-0 win, while 2022 world champion Ahsan Ramzan, 20, also won his match 4-0 against Mohamamd Abdullah.

Other players maintained strong form Abdul Sattar, who held the previous high break, won 4-0 with a 112 break. Ahmar Tariq, Rana Irfan and Aakash Rafique also recorded victories to bolster their knockout stage prospects.

Further down the order, Ian Mark John and Amir Sohail secured 4-2 victories, while Sheikh Mohammad Mudassir won a tense seven-frame encounter against Ali Raza. Mubashir Raza continued his strong run with a 4-1 win over fellow century-maker Sohaib Asad .

The group stage continues on Friday with the final round of matches, determining the 24 players who will advance to the knockout phase.

## Bayern beat Cologne to set Bundesliga record

COLOGNE: Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich battled past hosts Cologne 3-1 on Wednesday to record the best first half of a season in the league's history and maintain their 11-point lead at the top of the standings.

Bayern came from a goal down to earn their sixth league win in the last seven matches and moved up to 47 points with a goal difference of +53.

The previous best mark after 17 matches belonged to Pep Guardiola's Bayern from the 2013/14 season, also with 47 points but a goal difference of +35. Their 66-goal haul at this stage is also a new league record.

The Bavarians, who host Union Saint Gilloise in the Champions League next week, have clear water between themselves and Borussia Dortmund in second place on 36 points.

"I did congratulate the lads but that will be gone by tomorrow and of absolutely no priority for me that we now have this record," said Bayern coach Vincent Kompany, "We are in the middle of the season and have not won any title yet ... From tomorrow we start the second half and everything starts from zero."

Cologne did not look at all intimidated by Bayern's 8-1 demolition of VfL Wolfsburg on Sunday and took a fully deserved 41st-minute lead with Linton Maina's spectacular 60-metre solo run and superb finish to beat keeper Manuel Neuer.

The visitors managed to level before the break when Serge Gnabry flicked the ball into the net

COLOGNE: Bayern Munich's Serge Gnabry celebrates after scoring against Cologne during their Bundesliga match at RheinEnergieStadion.—AFP

off the crossbar from the tightest of angles in first-half stoppage time.

The hosts managed to keep Bayern away from their box for much of the second half but could do nothing when Hiroki Ito headed on a deep cross and Kim Min-jae nodded in for a 2-1 lead.

Teenager Lennart Karl, who came on as a second half substitute, made sure of the three points in the 84th minute when he slotted in from a Luis Diaz assist following a superb pass from Harry Kane for his fourth league goal of the season.

Willi Orban and Romulo scored as RB Leipzig reclaimed third spot with a 2-0 home with over Freiburg. Playing their first match of the calendar year after last weekend's game was cancelled due to bad weather, Leipzig lacked rhythm in the opening half but grabbed control with two goals in three second-half minutes.

Captain Orban scored from a David Raum free-kick in the 53rd minute before Romulo headed in a close-range rebound.

Leipzig now sit four points behind Dortmund with a game in hand and host leaders Bayern on Saturday.

Hoffenheim's continued their surprise turnaround after battling relegation last season, cruising past Borussia Moenchengladbach 5-1 at home to climb to fifth.

Andrej Kramaric hit a first-half hat-trick and Tim Lemperle and Max Moerstedt also got on the scoresheet, while Shuto Machino was the lone goalscorer for the visitors.

Earlier on Wednesday, Wolfsburg's Dzenan Pejcinovic scored a late winner in a 2-1 home victory over St Pauli, his fifth goal in his past three league matches.—Agencies

## Advantage Arsenal in League Cup semi-final after win at Chelsea

LONDON: Arsenal edged towards their first League Cup final since 2018 as they beat London rivals Chelsea 3-2 in the opening leg of their semi-final at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday.

Mikel Arteta's side were dominant for long spells and goals by Ben White, Viktor Gyokeres and Martin Zubimendi should have virtually sewn up the tie.

But Chelsea showed plenty of fight in Liam Rosenior's first home game in charge and a double from substitute Alejandro Garnacho kept their hopes alive.

With 17 goal attempts compared to Chelsea's 10, Arsenal will feel they should have gone home with a bigger margin of victory and it will be all to play for in north London on February 3.

ARSENAL'S Viktor Gyokeres (R, rear) scores against Chelsea during their League Cup semi-final first leg at Stamford Bridge.—Reuters

"I have to praise the players for the performance against a really good opponent. It's a really tough place to come. That's why I really value what the team has done again," Arteta said. "We had two massive chances to score the fourth one and the result would have been very different. At that moment they created a chance and scored a goal. So it is a very different feeling. It's game on."

Arsenal are now unbeaten in 10 games in all competitions as they moved a step closer to their first silverware since the 2020 FA Cup.

The Gunners had lost their previous four semi-finals across a variety of competitions, including the League Cup last year.

As well as leading the Premier League, Arsenal are also still chasing Champions League and FA Cup glory.

But after so many last-four failures in the recent past, Arteta won't take anything for granted.

"It's another step. It's just half-time. We know the big fight we are going to have at the Emirates in a few weeks because they are a top side," he said. "What we're doing every three days is impressive."

Chelsea were guilty of sloppy marking for White's seventh-minute headed opener before goalkeeper Robert Sanchez spilled White's cross early in the second half, leaving Gyokeres to tap home in the 49th minute.

Rosenior reacted by sending on Garnacho and he made an immediate impact, drilling home from close range after Arsenal failed to clear in the 57th minute.

Zubimendi restored the Gunners' two-goal advantage in the 71st minute after more lacklustre defending from Rosenior's men before Garnacho dragged Chelsea back into the tie, drilling past Kepa from a half-cleared corner in the 83rd minute.

Rosenior, who took charge of the club on January 6 following Enzo Maresca's sacking, said he should be held accountable for goalkeeper Sanchez's errors.

"I'm asking Rob to do things that he hasn't done before," Rosenior told reporters. "I said to him before the game, and I made this really clear, when my players make mistakes, I'm accountable. That's on me.

"He will improve in terms of his understanding. That's Rob's first game with me, I've had two days' work with him. My job is to help them, not to blame them."

Chelsea, who are eighth in the Premier League with 31 points — 18 away from leaders Arsenal — will next face Brentford on Saturday.—Agencies

## AFCON stays with form as Morocco, Senegal set up final showdown

RABAT: The rankings proved spot on as Africa's top two teams advanced to this weekend's Cup of Nations final, with Morocco and Senegal setting up a heavyweight clash.

But while Senegal overcame Egypt 1-0 in 90 minutes in Tangier on Wednesday, Morocco needed a penalty shootout before disposing of Nigeria after a goalless draw in Rabat to book their place in Sunday's decider.

The Cup of Nations has regularly produced surprises and upsets with previous editions having seen many pre-tournament favourites falter, but this time the two best teams will contest the final as a strong field in Morocco has been progressively whittled down, with the rankings proving accurate for once.

Morocco, whose only Cup of Nations triumph came half a century ago, are one of several previous underachievers, notably in recent years when the quality of their squad suggested they could win the trophy, but they are now on the cusp of success.

At this Cup of Nations as hosts they looked nervy initially under the burden of expectation but in their last two matches have shown the form that has seen them ranked top on the continent since their World Cup exploits in Qatar in 2022 when they became the first African country to reach a semi-final.

Moroccos aggressive pressing, high-tempo play and relentless attack saw them easily dispose of Cameroon in the quarter-finals, and while Nigeria proved tougher to dislodge in the semis, they were again much the better side.

Morocco finished the game stronger and fitter and converted all their penalties bar one with aplomb, with goalkeeper Yassine Bounou performing heroics by saving twice in the shoot-out they won 4-2.

Bounou, of Saudi side Al-Hilal, saved from Samuel Chukwueze and Bruno Onyemaechi, allowing Youssef En-Nesyri to convert the winning kick and spark wild celebrations among over 65,000 fans inside the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium.

On top of this, their defence gave Nigeria's dangerous forward Victor Osimhen no opportunities, marking him out of the game. Morocco have conceded once in six matches at the tournament and that was a penalty in their second group game against Mali.

"Today, were reaping the rewards of the golden age of Moroccan football but we mustn't forget where we come from," said coach Walid Regragui, who played in the last Atlas Lions team to reach the AFCON final when they lost to Tunisia in 2004.

"It was one of the hardest matches we have had against a very solid and talented team. I am very happy for the players and for the Moroccan people who really deserve this. It is a great gift for them to be in the final but we will need to recover quickly because we put a lot of energy into the game."

RABAT: Morocco goalkeeper Yassine Bounou stops a penalty kick from Nigeria's Samuel Chukwueze during their Africa Cup of Nations semi-final at the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium.—AFP

Regragui has won belated plaudits for his tactical acumen but still has one more hurdle to overcome with a confident Senegal waiting in the final.

Senegal, through to a third final in the past four editions, have a strong attacking lineup and scored in all six matches en route to the final, with Sadio Mane hitting the late semi-final winner against Egypt.

It was a goal that confirmed the 33-year-old's continued importance to the side, even if they have several other potential match winners, and Mane is looking to go out with another winners' medal.

"We know how to play the final," Mane warned after Wednesday's success. "A final is meant to be won. I will be very happy to play my last AFCON final, to enjoy it and to make my country win."

Senegal, champions in 2022, dominated possession against cautious Egypt as the Cup of Nations title continues to elude Liverpool superstar Mohamed Salah.

This was Salah's fifth AFCON and the closest he has come to a winners' medal is finishing a runner-up twice.

Referring to his former Liverpool teammate Salah, Mane said the Egyptian is "one of the best players in the world".

The goal that decided the game came with 12 minutes remaining, as Mane's low shot flew past the goalkeeper and into the net.—Agencies